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ABSTRACT

Experiences in using positive reinforcement while teaching on an Indian reservation are presented for teachers and administrators. Several "positive reinforcers," intended to prevent potential discipline problems from occurring, are described, including student involvement in deciding on classroom rules, election of classroom officers, class meetings, letters written by classroom officers to important officials in Washington, D.C., and class election of a "Student of the Week." Criteria for Student of the Week are as follows: shows initiative, keeps desk neat and clean, obeys classroom and school rules, gets along well with others, completes class assignments on time, and participates in class discussion. Other positive reinforcers detailed are Scrabble tournaments and popcorn parties, both earned by the Indian children through good classroom behavior. Use of various outdoors activities is also suggested. Recommendations are presented for finding ways of making the teaching year enjoyable for all students and for the teacher. (MH)

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An Experience in Using Positive Reinforcement With Children From A Divergent Culture

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ABSTRACT

The purpose for this writing was to share with teachers and administrators some experiences in using positive reinforcement with a divergent culture. While teaching on an Indian reservation several "positive reinforcers" were implemented to prevent potential discipline problems from occuring. Other positive reinforcement efforts were used to reinforce appropriate behavior in the classroom. Students were receptive to the positive measures as evidenced by an overall sincere exemplification on their part of good behavior. The writer urges teachers to give attention and praise to the good things that children do, and cites some examples he used in bringing about a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

An Experience In Using Positive Reinforcement With Children From A Divergent Culture

More emphasis needs to be placed on positive behavior in schools. There are ways to bring out positive behavior in children. One does not have to wait to discipline when something gets out of hand. When something goes wrong teachers do not have to turn to harsh discipline, as has been the case traditionally (Harris, 1928, p. 27).

In the past the "rod of correction" was "an ordinance of God," which was to be used (Brown, 1910, p. 136). There existed the belief that education, like baptism, marriage, the sacraments, and burial was in the hands of the church. It was normal to associate corporal punishment with God's will (Travers, 1980, p. 185).

In his book, Schools Without Failure, Glasser emphasized that too many children experience failure. Reasons for such experience were diverse, but really amounted to one fact: negative matters outweighing the positive matters in the schools. In some schools intense pressure to succeed was one factor mentioned as causing children to feel inadequate and causing them to fail as a result. The most prevalent reason given for failure in the schools was that schools have been teaching kids to fail. When a child needs attention he will get it any way he can. Often this attention has been in the form of negative discipline, and from this children have learned to respond negatively. In a nutshell, Glasser has

suggested that if we call a kid a dummy long enough, this is what he will come to believe he is (Glasser, 1975, p.1).

This author tried some alternatives to the negative disciplining techniques of the past while teaching a combination third/fourth grade class on an Indian reservation, during the school year 1981-82. Using some "positive reinforcers" made the teaching assignment a rich and rewarding experience. Other teachers on the reservation and in other schools in the corporation informed me that discipline problems would be high, when I attended a teachers' meeting in the summer prior to the beginning of school.

My family and I were new in a community near the reservation. It seemed as though the people in the community knew everybody in town and were quick to pick up our newness to the area. It was not uncommon to receive negative comments when pointing out that my wife and I were teaching at the Indian school. Several of the people in the community indicated that there was high alcoholism on the reservation, drug abuse, child abuse, and that the crime rate was high. My wife and I wondered what we had gotten ourselves into when first hearing these things. It was obvious these people had a negative attitude about the reservation, and it seemed as though much of what was said was stereotyping. I decided not to make any judgments and to attempt to make the teaching assignment a beautiful experience. It seemed interesting when considering the idea

of learning about the culture of these people, and it seemed a privilege in a sense to be able to teach in this unique setting. With these thoughts I soon developed an eagerness to begin the school year.

Some Examples

So many teachers make the rules of a classroom without student involvement. In a sense this seems dictatorial. It excludes the children from the process of decision making. In such a case the teacher has done all the thinking, reasoning, and logical construction of the rules. The children in such a situation are asked only to comprehend the rules as they are presented, to remember them, and to obey them.

At the beginning of the year the students and I decided most of the classroom rules together. I felt it more appropriate to ask the students to think of rules that would be necessary for the classroom. They were reminded that games such as "Monopoly" have rules. There was some discussion concerning the reasons for rules in such games. The children seemed to have a good understanding of why rules were necessary as a result. This provided motivation, and the children were enthusiastic in writing rules on the chalkboard for their classroom.

From the very first day of school the children had a feeling that this classroom was theirs, and that their contributions to it would be essential. Sometime during approximately the third week of school, allowing the children

some time to get to know one another better, a classroom election was held. Prior to the election a discussion was held concerning the duties each position would entail. It was decided that the classroom officers would preside over periodic class meetings. Class meetings could consist of any matter relevant to the class. Such things as discipline, class parties, and special events were discussed throughout the school year. This proved to be an interesting and educational experience for the children.

One of the most meaningful experiences for the classroom officers involved writing letters to important officials in Washington, D.C. The class president wrote a letter to President Reagan, the class vice-president wrote to Vice President Bush, the secretary wrote to Secretary of State Haig, and the treasurer wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Regan. Each of the classroom officers received a nice letter with various pictures. It was exciting for the entire class, as the officers received the mail from Washington, D.C. and shared this with the class. The pictures included a personal picture of the presidential helicopter, pictures of Air Force One, and a group picture of the nation's top leaders along with President Reagan. President Reagan was so impressed that he had a special photograph sent to the school, after first having the White House calligrapher to emboss a few words on the picture to the children of the school. This experience was motivational to the children, and created additional

discussion during "Current Events Discussion" each morning.

Each week the class elected a "Student of the Week." The class was asked to observe other class members and to consider nominating students who met criteria including the following:

1. Shows initiative.
2. Keeps desk neat and clean.
3. Obeys classroom and school rules.
4. Gets along well with others.
5. Completes class assignments on time.
6. Participates in class discussion.

A different student was chosen each week, following one of the rules for this activity. As a result each student had an opportunity of being chosen. A poster with the mentioned criteria was displayed on the door of the classroom so that other classes could see it. Those individuals who were selected received a certificate with this criteria listed, and a letter was sent home to the parents. Some of their better papers were displayed as well. Several of the children put forth much effort in hopes of being selected each week.

One way to prevent discipline problems is to deter them with "positive reinforcers." This refers to things the teacher uses to motivate students so that discipline problems are avoided.

The Indian children enjoyed "Scrabble tournaments." On Friday afternoons, provided that the children "worked hard," and demonstrated good behavior, I sometimes gave the students time for a "Scrabble tournament."

Students were divided into teams. A set of partners made up a team. Two teams played per table. The winning pair of children on each team was awarded a prize. In the next "Scrabble tournament," played on another day, I assigned the winners of one game with winners of another, and losers with losers of another game. The new arrangements enabled each pair of partners to become winners at some time throughout the year. This activity gave the children experience in working with other children, as well as providing practice in spelling skills. The children enjoyed the activity very much, and liked the idea of not being able to use a dictionary, and the other players being responsible for catching mistakes. If a mistake was suspected only then could the entire four players use a dictionary to check the spelling.

Another "positive reinforcer" was periodic parties. The class earned letters to spell out "Popcorn Party" for extra good behavior in the classroom. For negative behavior letters could be lost, but it was my idea to stress and accentuate the positive behavior over the negative behavior. Usually the children decided by voting what kind of party they would work for as a class. The most popular party chosen was the "Popcorn Party." The party was not at all elaborate. For outstanding behavior, I would put a letter on the chalkboard. When "Popcorn Party" was spelled out, one Friday afternoon I would bring in a popcorn popper and prepare popcorn to be passed out to the children while they were involved in a "Scrabble tournament."

There is so much to learn outdoors; yet, few elementary teachers consistently use this gigantic and fascinating outdoor classroom. I used it for math lessons, science, art, reading, and a variety of other experiences. Both myself, as well as the principal of the school participated in sledding activities when the area had a large snowfall. In the spring the school had kite flying day. The activity helped to make school fun and interesting for the children.

I also used positive reinforcement for clean plates at lunchtime. The principal indicated that there was a noticeable improvement in the class over the previous year in the reduced amount of food that was thrown away by students.

There were still some behavioral problems with some children, but I felt that these activities did bring about much positive behavior, and that discipline problems were held to a minimum.

Suggestions

I recommend that teachers find ways of making the teaching year enjoyable for all students and for the teacher. It requires that both have a good and rewarding experience. Try to discover all you can about the children that you have. Find their smiles, find their good traits, and praise the good things that they do. Look for tangible ways to give attention to the positive things children do. This will make children feel that they are somebody, and that school really is a nice place to be.

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